

Sarasota Radio Station Sees a Lot of Potential Strength in Low-Power FM

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SARASOTA – On-air personnel at one of this West Coast city’s newest local radio stations identify it repeatedly not just by its call letters – WSLR – but also by its license category – LPFM, which stands for low-power FM.

The station is a unique animal in the Sarasota audio jungle – and one of just a few in all of Florida listening land.

By definition of the Federal Communication Commission, LPFM maximum output is a signal of 100 watts from an antenna 100 feet above average terrain, providing a broadcast radius of perhaps 3.5 miles. Licenses are for non-commercial, educational purposes, which can cover a lot of territory, even if the signal cannot. A station in Wisconsin owned by a polka appreciation society airs – you guessed it – polka music. Elsewhere, low-power stations have distinguished themselves in providing critical community information in the aftermath of hurricanes and other disasters.

Dave Beaton, WSLR board chair, thinks there are four such stations on air in Florida so far. According to the February 2006 issue of Popular Communications magazine – which features a photo of two WSLR volunteers on the cover – 30 applicants in the state have been approved for LPFM licenses. Once that happens, a station has 18 months to get on the air and use its license – or lose it.

Beaton got involved in radio as a college student in Michigan and at one point operated the board for a National Public Radio affiliate. A Sarasota-area resident since 1991, he currently teaches digital filmmaking at Manatee Community College in Bradenton. Around 1998, he recalls, the FCC announced the availability of a low-power license in the Bradenton area. “The FCC only has a four-day window” in which to apply, he says. “I didn’t have the technical expertise, and nobody else did, either. The window came and went.”

Fast forward to the new millennium. In 2000 the window for an LP station at 96.5 FM in Sarasota opened. Four or five entities filed applications. One was the New College Student Alliance, the independent student government of the state school located on the Sarasota/Manatee County line. Another was a local veterinarian who operated a small animal-rights theme park.

Beaton began talking with the vet, whose personal situation eventually led to his turning the community organization he had created as the basis for his FCC application over to Beaton and his partner in life and business, Arlene Sweeting. Beaton also started talks with Bo Bentele, who was shepherding the NCSA application. Eventually, they agreed to merge and file jointly. None of the other applicants took this tack; as a result, the joint proposal was approved.

The way the FCC decides who gets a low-power license involves awarding points to applicants. “You get a point for saying you’re going to do eight hours of local programming,” Beaton explains. “Well, you’re required to do that, but if you didn’t check the box, you wouldn’t get a point.” But when two applicants merge, they get their combined total of points. The timeline is tricky, too, Beaton says: “You get four days to apply, then it takes two to three years to get an answer. Lots of organizations just disappear in the meantime... You’ve got to be a radio activist; you have to be driven. Otherwise, you’d just walk away from it.”

Beaton and Sweeting – a 13-year area resident who formerly taught middle-school

science in Manatee County and is now WSLR's general manager – are definitely driven. Sweeting is the station's sole paid employee – contracted at \$10 an hour for 20 hours a week, no matter how many multiples thereof she actually puts in. The two are also co-owners of the Fogartyville Café, a Bradenton folk-music mecca that has been the scene of numerous fund-raisers for the station.

According to its mission statement WSLR “features locally produced programming and presents cultural, artistic and political perspectives currently under-represented in the media.” Its stated goal is “to inform and empower listeners to play an active role in WSLR and in their community” through broadcasting that “promotes equality, peace, sustainability, democracy, and social and economic justice.”

More than 85 local programs air weekly, anywhere from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. They're produced and hosted by “programmers” who range age from 8 years to folks “well into their 70s, maybe 80s,” Sweeting says. Many have music formats, but there's also “The Surreal News,” a political satire show, and “The Saturday Morning Cartoon Show” hosted by the 8-year-old and a pal two years his senior.

Anybody and everybody is encouraged to get involved, but it's not an automatic walk-on. Aspiring programmers must have their proposals approved by a five-member committee and get training in FCC regulations and in the operation of studio equipment. Many of the programmers are New College students. Several college and high school interns have received credit for volunteering at the station.

There's an hour of public affairs programming each weekday morning and again each afternoon. Local news currently airs on Monday and Friday from 5:30 to 6 p.m. There are syndicated shows from 5 to 7 p.m. weekdays when there's no local news, including Pacifica Radio's popular “Democracy Now!” with Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez (www.pacifica.org). WSLR is getting into podcasting, with Internet streaming to come. Down the road Sweeting envisions the establishment of an independent media center and a local cable-access audio station.

WSLR has established partnerships with the Downtown Sarasota business association, the downtown farmers' market, the local Jewish Community Center and an annual environmental-awareness festival. It has arranged for the delayed broadcast of lectures by prominent speakers brought to town by the local organization Forum Truth for a Change. And it's an affiliate of the Pacifica Network (<http://pacificanetwork.org>), the Prometheus Radio Project (www.prometheusradio.org), and the National Federation of Community Broadcasters.

If it hadn't been for friends from Pacifica and Prometheus, WSLR might never have made it onto the airwaves last October. Goodman, who was in Sarasota for a film festival last year, gave a pep talk in the Fogartyville Café parking lot that drew an audience of 300 – and made the news on Tampa's hugely successful community radio station, WMNF. Prometheus sent a team of three technicians to spearhead the weekend “barn-raising” that got the studio built and the antenna raised.

The studio is located in a tiny bungalow that Beaton owns and leases to the station for a nominal fee. A former crack house in an iffy neighborhood, it's located less than a stone's throw from a gas station out back and a supermarket across the street. There's no new carpet yet to replace the ratty one that was taken up. And unless and until WSLR gets a variance for its residential zoning, there'll be no sign outside identifying the station.

But “This is the community we want to be in, that we want to serve,” Sweeting says. “We know the neighbors, and we feel welcome.” It's a community of Caucasians, African-Americans,

Hispanics and others – located a few blocks west of Sarasota’s most diverse public high school and a few blocks east of magnificent Old Sarasota mansions along the bay.

Initial plans for installing the antenna atop a 13-story downtown building fell through three weeks before the station had to be on the air. FCC rules restricted options for an alternate site on short notice. Plan B became the utilization of an existing tower in the backyard of a residence on the city’s south side with the antenna just 35 feet high. With a radius of about 3.5 miles, the station’s signal blankets too much of Sarasota Bay and not enough of the northern and eastern parts of the city.

Negotiations are under way with a house of worship located about three miles east of downtown to erect a 100-foot antenna on that property. The move, targeted for completion by fall, will entail not only securing approval of the congregation but also going through another city permitting process.

According to Beaton, “Local governments don’t know what to do with low-power FM stations... A lot of tests have to be met either from the government’s or the station’s perspective. It all takes time.” But he’s found most Sarasota City Council members very supportive: “City government politicians are not the same as city bureaucracy.”

WSLR serves an area also reached by three NPR affiliates – the University of South Florida’s venerable WUSF (89.7) in Tampa, Gulf Coast University’s WGPU (90.1) in Fort Myers, and Tampa’s powerhouse community station, WMNF (88.5), which raised \$450,000 in its weeklong on-air pledge drive this spring. The Sarasota station will hold its first on-air drive in mid-June, with the immediate goal of covering the cost of relocating and raising the antenna.

One of just two local stations in Sarasota with news departments, WSLR plans call for expanding its coverage. A daylong training session one recent Sunday attracted a dozen citizen reporter wannabees, along with a couple of experienced pros. The main presenters were WMNF associate news director Mitch Perry, WSLR news director Ed Ericsson, and this writer, a career newspaper editor. Perry spoke of a potential symbiotic relationship that could make the two stations partners, not competitors: “We want the best for you... We cover Sarasota, but not the way we’d like to. I encourage you to send your stories up to Tampa, too.”

Beaton also says it’s not about competition: “This is not a David and Goliath question. We’re empowering the people on a more grassroots scale, where we bring people in and they learn to be programmers, to become radio activists.”

The February Popular Communications article states that low-power FM has come about in the last decade “partially in response to criticism of FCC deregulation that relaxed radio station ownership rules that, by most accounts, diluted local community service across the dial.” As in more satellite-feeds and less local programming.

The article continues: “Initially it was proposed that LPFM broadcast stations be allowed on second adjacent frequencies or ‘channels’ of existing broadcast stations [i.e., two decimal points away on the dial]. However, the proposal was short-circuited by existing ‘full-service’ broadcasters concerned about increased interference. The final FCC ruling [which is under review] limited LPFM to within the third adjacent channel, significantly watering down the effectiveness of the service in urban areas where the FM broadcast band is too crowded to accept any new radio stations.”

It was sheer luck that a signal hole became available in downtown Sarasota, Beaton says: “They can be in the middle of a cow pasture. In Manatee County, there’s one in the middle of a mangrove swamp.”

Blessed with its urban outreach, WSLR has “a lot of listeners,” Beaton says, “but not

enough.” About 300 of them currently have annual memberships anywhere from \$10 (student/low income) or \$25 (standard) upward. “Part of our technical mission is to get our signal out there in a more stable manner with higher saturation,” he says. “I hope we’ll get up to 10 miles; some say we’re going to get 20.”

He says Sweeting’s goal is “to keep the station up and running day to day,” while his is “to keep that vision, keep pushing the envelope, keep getting more people involved.”

Read more about the station at www.wslr.org. E-mail your comments on this article to info@floridamediaproject.org.